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Nietzsche's Reading of Cervantes' "Cruel" Humor in *Don Quijote*

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The separation of philosophy from literature and vice-versa is an aspect of early twentieth century intellectual sclerosis that affected a particular region of the globe. I am, of course, referring to the British/American school of philosophy otherwise known as analytic philosophy—or the logico-linguistic turn in philosophy begun by Russell, Lewis, Strawson and others, based on a faith in the universal Truth of pure reason critiqued by their own god, Kant. Therefore, that contemporary French philosopher, Alain Badiou, would have to invent the term "inaesthetics" to refer to the inextricable relation between philosophy and literature, only demonstrates how far we have strayed from the course first paved by Plato twenty-five hundred years ago—a course that continued well into the nineteenth century and twentieth century with thinkers like Nietzsche and Sartre. Nietzsche, for instance, began his academic career not a philosopher but as a classical philologist, whose innovative and insightful work on ancient Greek and Latin literature, earned him a reputation as the most promising philologist of his time. Fortunately for us--and if we take Nietzsche's at his words, fortunately for him as well--this rising young star of philology who secured a tenured position at the University of Basel before completing his doctoral dissertation, became a meteoric falling star, tumbling down to earth in luminescent fire, with the controversial publication of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

The academic world vilified *The Birth of Tragedy* for lacking in scholarly seriousness, and for imputing qualities to the dithyramb and the Dionysian and Apollonian "Geist" that had nothing to do with the way everyone understood them to function. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möellendorf, the most respected classical philologist of the time, kindly advised the young philologist to leave the profession. At which point, Nietzsche ceased to be a philologist to become a philosopher; the philosopher of the "gaya scienza," and the philosopher-poet of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* who would read literature philosophically.

What follows, then, are some remarks on what Nietzsche had to say about *Don Quijote*, in light of his overall critique of Romanticism. That Nietzsche's reading of *Don Quijote* is part of a philosophical project, which often includes a virulent attack on Christianity, is what makes his position so important for cultural studies, though not at all for the old sacred cows of Spanish philology who go on masticating without anything in their mouths.

Cruel, cruel humor

Nietzsche, who is often associated with nineteenth century Romanticism, was nothing of the kind—or more accurately, that is what he wanted us to believe. But perhaps, the truth lies somewhere in the middle, for just as Nietzsche was a "Romantic" insofar as he believed that our relation to the world was primarily affective, and inasmuch he valorized the "aristocratic" values of a Don Quijote who did battle with the forces of "herd morality," he was not a Romantic when it came to placing any value on the passive, ascetic, and life-denying suffering of a Jesus Christ, a Saint Francis, or a Parsifal. And here is where Nietzsche's sentimentalism ends and his reading *of Don Quijote* begins.

Note the anthropological tenor of Nietzsche's interpretation of *Don Quijote* in *On the Genealogy of Morals*--the work Deleuze and Guattari once called "the great book of modern ethnology" (1975 192)--where Nietzsche wrote:

> [I]t is not long since princely weddings and public festivals of the more magnificent kind were unthinkable without executions, torturing, or perhaps an auto-da-fé, and no noble household was without creatures upon whom one heedlessly vent one's malice and cruel jokes […]. Consider, for instance, Don Quixote at the court of the Duchess. Today we read *Don Quixote* with a bitter taste in our mouths, almost with a feeling of torment, and would thus seem very strange and incomprehensible to its author and his contemporaries; they read it with the clearest of conscience in the world as the most cheerful of books, they laughed themselves almost to death over it. (1969 #6: 66)[1]

A number of factors underpin Nietzsche's interpretation of the way *Don Quijote* was read in the seventeenth century in contrast to the way it was read in the nineteenth, and perhaps continues to be read today. Firstly, Nietzsche reminds us that what we "today" consider objectionable, horrific practices (e.g. torture and public executions) were once thought of as pleasurable forms of entertainment. Consider for a moment the pre-Christian Roman circus and its audience, which could joyfully witness the violent death of others without the slightest degree of guilt. Once we even kept all kinds of animals around the house so that we could vent our malice on them, says Nietzsche. Laughter, and not simply humor, was a result of our human, all too human enjoyment of cruelty. When readers of the famous Spanish novel read of its protagonist's "crazy" doings, "they laughed themselves almost to death over it," writes Nietzsche. In short, for seventeenth century readers, Don Quijote was not the Romantic hero, who foolishly fought in the name of long forgotten ideals, and who stood for our aspirations to be more than we are, but a fool deserving of derision. For, who in fact, was Don Quijote, if not a madman? And one did little else but to laugh at the mad. He was certainly not the representative hero of Spanish idealism. No madman, regardless of his/her temporary lucidity, would have been considered a symbol of national identity.

The Laughable Madman

The English translation of *On the Genealogy of Morals* was published in 1969. This was also the year P.E. Russell published his essay, "'Don Quixote' as a Funny Book," a paper first presented at Oxford in 1967. I mention this because I suppose that wittingly or unwittingly, there is a relation between Nietzsche's interpretation of *Don Quijote* as a comic work and Russell's argument that the book was originally meant to be comical, as conceived by Nietzsche. Of *Don Quijote* Russell writes:

> It can hardly be denied that a great deal of it *is* concerned with describing tricks and hoaxes, with making sport of the protagonist, his squire, and many other characters—all this with the object of occasioning that boisterous laughter from the spectators which Cervantes so frequently describes. (312)

From the seventeenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, says Russell, *Don Quijote*, was read as a text of "joyful wisdom," as Cervantes intended it (1977 I: 84; 1950 30). However, as Russell informs us, in 1954 "a distinguished Hispanist who undertook a new translation of Don Quixote into English explained that he had pruned away many chapters of Part II because 'the element of unfeeling horseplay renders them somewhat distasteful to readers of today'" (Op. cit.

[1]The number that follows the # symbol refers to the aphorism. This will make it easier for the reader to locate the quote whether in the original or in translation, regardless of edition.

313). The Hispanist had, in the name of good morals, excised the "unfeeling" passages, because as he himself said, "readers of today" would have found them "distasteful" (Ibid). Ironically, these "readers of today" are the same nineteenth century, guilt-ridden readers that Nietzsche had accused of reading *Don Quijote* with a "bad conscience"—a book whose initial aim was poisoned with the morose seriousness of what Nietzsche termed, "the spirit of gravity." Why not laugh at the madman? "If one wants to consider *Don Quixote* as a funny book one must, inevitably also discuss Don Quixote's madness, for, as far as the knight is concerned, the fun—as Cervantes saw it—was inescapable from the madness," argues Russell (313). The seventeenth century laughed at deformity, mental retardation, the toothless and the infirm, etc., and hence the court dwarfs of Velázquez *Las meninas* or the obese, naked little girl of Carreño's *La monstrua desnuda*. Russell writes:

> Cervantes and his contemporaries had views about what was funny which differed in various respects from ours. They believed that laughter and the ridiculous were provoked by some form of ugliness, of *turpitudo*, symbolized by the distorting mask worn by the players in ancient comedy. A deviation from the natural order of things lay at the root of the ridiculous. The deviation had to be of a kind that could not easily be eliminated though also, if it was to be laughable, it must be incapable of causing serious harm. It was on this basis that that age justified its view that insanity provided it was not too violent, was funny. (Ibid. 320-321)

That the mad were laughed at seems from all historical accounts to have been a fact; but a fact that ceases to be so by the latter part of the seventeenth century, when the mad, as Foucault has so well documented, began to be incarcerated and medically categorized. One made fun of the local madman or madwoman, covered him or her in tarred feathers, and played all kinds of practical jokes on the witless subject, but one did not hide this person from the sight of others. The mad were part of the fabric of the society. This was in part due to economics. As a "member" of the middle class Cervantes' Don Quijote did not need to work.

But as society was beginning to change from that of an agrarian, landed economy, where money was made from the land, to one where money was made from the sales of goods in the city squares, it became imperative that the self-employed subject—of which the *pícaro* is an example—would have to become a productive member of society. "The new meanings assigned to poverty, and the importance accorded to the obligation to work and the ethical values surrounding it were ultimately determining factors in the experience of madness, transforming its meaning," writes Foucault in *The History of Madness* (2006 77).[2] Foucault continues:

[2]Numerous were the essays published in Spain in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century on the question of poverty. At such time, poverty became an economic/epistemological problem, and therefore morally problematic. Among these treatises were Luis Vives' *De subventione pauperum* (1526), Fray Domingo de Soto's *Deliberación en la causa de los pobres* (1545), Miguel Giginta's *Cadena de oro* (1584), and the physician and poet, Cristóbal Pérez de Herrera's *Discursos del amparo de los legítimos pobres* (1598/1975; Discourses on the Protection of the Truly Poor).The debate centered around who was and was not legitimately poor; who truly deserved alms, and who lived off the money of those who worked. In the course of governing his island, Sancho clearly states: "es mi intención limpiar esta ínsula de todo género de gente vagamunda, holgazanes y mal entretenida; porque quiero que sepáis, amigos, que la gente baldía y perezosa es en la república los mesmo que los zánganos en las colmenas, que se comen la miel que las trabajadoras abejas hacen. Pienso favorecer a los labradores…"(*Don Quijote*-II 1977 391). ["I intend to cleanse this isle of every sort of impurity, and of your vagabond, idle and ill-conditioned persons. For I should like you to know, friends, that your vagrant and lazy sort are the same thing in a state as drones are in the hive, eating up the honey the workers make. I intend to favor labouring men…" (*Don Quixote* 1950 781)]. It is not

> A new sensibility had been born: a line had been drawn, a threshold established, and its purpose was banishment. The society of the classical age created a neutral zone in its own concrete space, a blank page where the real life of the city was suspended; order was no longer in free conflict with disorder, and reason no longer attempted to find its way through places that eluded it or refused it entry. Reason reigned in a pure manner, triumphantly, and victory over unchained reason was guaranteed in advance. Madness was denied the imaginary liberty that still allowed it to flourish at the time of the Renaissance. Not so long ago it was still visible in the light of day, as in *King Lear* or *Don Quixote*, but in the space of less than half a century it found itself a recluse in the fortress of confinement, bound to Reason, to the rules of morality and the their monotonous nights. (Ibid)

In other words, the moment we became "humanists," concerned with the plight and treatment of the mad, the moment we stopped laughing at the Don Quijotes of the world, cruel as that was, was also the moment we began to lack them up in darkened rooms, away from everyone's sight to spare us the embarrassment of their insanity. Today we medicate the schizophrenic, take away his/her hallucinations, and return him/her to the world: a productive member of society, bound to the rules of Reason and the work ethic. And thus while Nietzsche's "frog perspective" points to the banality that all interpretations are historically determined (e.g. Borges' "Pierre Menard"),[3] such perspectivism is more significantly a reminder that the subject of laughter—the matter of Cervantes' masterpiece—to the extent that it is a construct of history, is first and foremost a product of morality, or what is the same, of *mis/interpretation.*[4]

Reluctant Romanticism?

Caroline Picart argues in her essay, "Nietzsche as Masked Romantic," that despite Nietzsche's criticism of German Romanticism, Nietzsche's was very much a Romantic thinker. Among the seven "persistent romantic" qualities Picart claims to have influenced Nietzsche's thinking was that of "a consuming aspiration to be able to command both nature and especially the self, even to the point of the sacrifice of one's life for the sake of ideals" (1997 288)—a quality that Nietzsche attributed to the character of Don Quijote, with whom he identified himself. In *Daybreak*, Nietzsche went as far as to identify Don Quijote with the Christ who having been sacrificed for the sins of men exclaimed: "'my God, why hast thou forsaken me!'"

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to be wondered, then, that the madness of Don Quijote is tacitly the product of his idleness, the same idleness that Cervantes will impute to his comfortable, "desocupado lector,"on the very first page of the novel. The once praised *otium* of the medieval imaginary was now put into question by by the ethos of the Reformation.

[3]Not in spite of but rather precisely because of his metaphysical posturings, Borges is a comic writer; and the joke of "Pierre Menard" is that he has presented his readers with a mirror image of their own internal time consciousness, which they have interpreted, much like the earthlings of Lem's *Solaris*, to be transcendental. The *Pierre Menard* of the story is a place holder--an *x* which can be exchanged for any other *x*, as it happens with the race and ethnicity of racial and ethnic jokes that are readily interchangeable to fit the circumstances.

[4]"[T]here is no such thing as a moral fact," writes Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*. "Moral sentiment has this in common with religious sentiment: it believes in realities which do not exist. Morality is only an interpretation of certain phenomena, or, more definitely, a *mis*interpretation of them" (2004 #1: 30). And Alexander Nehamas observes: "Where others had previously seen merely a natural development of natural human needs, desires, and relationships…Nietzsche saw instead what he described as a system of signs. Such a system, naturally, like all systems of signs, remains incomprehensible until we know what its signs are signs of and signs for. In order, then, to show that morality can be interpreted, Nietzsche actually interprets it; and his interpretation involves a demonstration that morality itself is an interpretation to begin with" (2006 59).

(1997 #114: 70). Walter Kaufmann, once Nietzsche's best known interpreter, says in his book, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, that "Nietzsche loved Don Quixote… [and censured] Cervantes for having made his hero look ridiculous…" (1968 71, note 40).[5] This was the Nietzsche who once pronounced that "one had to be willing to be a buffoon if one desired to be a philosopher;" the Nietzsche who viewed his earlier philological studies, as "a magnificent example of Don Quixotism,'" and claimed in an unpublished note cited by Kaufman: "'[Don Quixotism] is what all philology is at best…One imitates a mere chimera…which has never existed'" (Ibid). Whereas of Cervantes' treatment of his protagonist, he wrote:

> Cervantes could have fought the Inquisition, but he preferred to make its victims, i.e., its heretics and idealists of all kinds, look ridiculous. (Ibid)

Yet, what is worse, and unforgivable for Nietzsche is that Cervantes could not even "spare his hero the dreadful illumination about his own state" at the end of the novel.[6] Instead Don Quijote is made the laughingstock of everyone around him as he takes his last breath, and the epitaph placed upon his grave by Sansón Carrasco, cruelly reads:

> Fue el espantajo y el coco
> del mundo, en tal coyuntura,
> que acreditó su ventura,
> morir cuerdo y vivir loco. (*Don Quijote* 1977, II, 577)
> […as a scarecrow in men's eyes
> He lived, and was their bugbear too;
> And had the luck with much ado,
> To live a fool, and yet die wise] (*Don Quixote* 1950, 939)

"Cervantes' choice of descriptive terms for Don Quixote here could hardly be more derisive," writes P. E. Russell (1969 324) in response to the epitaph just cited in the last chapter (Part II) of

[5]In *Nietzsche en España*, Gonzalo Sobejano cites Clarín and the journalist, Francisco Navarro Ledesma, for equating "el loco alemán" with Cervantes' other well-known madman, *El licencidado vidriera* (1967 467, 469). Navarro's notion, however, that Cervantes' Vidriera anticipated Nietzsche's *ubermensch*, couldn't be further from the German philosopher's idea of the *overman*. For while Nietzsche—as did Unamuno later on (Ibid. 298)--may have seen some tacit analogy between Don Quijote and Zarathustra *qua* wandering warriors of *a revaluation of values*, I fail to see what would have made Nietzsche conceive of Vidriera as "la imagen del superhombre" (Ibid. 469) [the image of the superman]. As Sobejano demonstrated almost half a century ago, Nietzsche's thought influenced almost all the great writers of the '98 generation and beyond; but at times it did so in ways that Nietzsche would have found less than salutary. Unamuno tried as best he could to accommodate Nietzsche's anti-Christianity within Spanish Catholicism, and Ramiro de Maeztu looked to Nietzsche for models for a nationalist project (Ibid. 328)—two of the very things that Nietzsche railed against: Christianity and nationalism, the combination of which constituted Nietzsche's worst nightmare. What is worse: though these Spanish writers used Nietzsche to establish all kinds of analogies, as for example, between Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, and Nietzschean philosophy, none seem to have taken the time to read what Nietzsche himself had to say about either Cervantes or *Don Quijote*, or for that matter, about Spain.

[6]Here Alonso Quijano asks Sancho forgiveness for having included him in his madness. "Perdóname, amigo, de la ocasión que te he dado de parecer loco como yo, haciéndote caer en el error en que yo he caído, de que hubo y hay caballeros andantes en el mundo…Yo fui loco, y ya soy cuerdo: fui don Don Quijote de la Mancha, y soy agora…Alonso Quijano el Bueno" (*Don Quijote*-II 1977 575, 576); ["Pardon me, friend, that I caused you to appear mad, like me, making you fall into the same sort of error as myself, the belief that there were and still are knights errant in the world...I was mad, but I am sane now. I was Don Quijote de la Mancha, but to-day, as I have said, I am Alonso Quixano the Good"] (*Don Quixote* 1950 937, 938).

the novel. The words "coco," Russell explains, "belonged to the language of children and was used to describe something that frightened," and "espantajo," besides meaning scarecrow, "described [according to Covarrubias] someone who, at first sight, seemed to merit respect but turned out to be undeserving of it because he lacked real substance" (Ibid. 324-325). Nothing, following a careful study of both parts of the novel, argues Russell, suggests that "Cervantes himself thought of his book—except of course, for those sections in which the knight and his squire are temporarily put on one side—as anything other than a funny book" (Ibid. 324). If that is the case, then we have to ask: why it is that Nietzsche objects, as he does, to Cervantes' treatment of his hero? Why is it that Nietzsche finds Cervantes' mockery of Don Quijote objectionable when, in the same breath, he tells us, that "cruelty is one of the oldest festive joys of mankind" (1997 #18 16)? Or when he suggests that seventeenth century readers of the novel laughed at the protagonist's insane actions with a "good conscience" (1969 #6: 66)? I believe the answer lies in the morally ambiguous nature of laughter itself. Rather than simplify our understanding of laughter, Nietzsche problematizes it by making it the object of a genealogy of morals: presented as a mirror of what we are when we are morally strong and what we are when are morally weak.

In an important essay of 1897, entitled "The Psychology of Tickling, Laughing, and the Comic," G. Stanley Hall and Arthur Allin write:[7]

> The practical joke is war, cruelty, torture reduced to the level and intensity of play, and must not transcend its bounds. To give and take in jest what was once the wager of life and death, marks a distinct though late recapitulatory state of the development of the soul. It is the culture of religion, art, literature, education, and civilization generally which has reduced these fierce and often brutal propensities, and that probably chiefly within the historic period, to their present harmless forms. (23-24).

This, I think, is Nietzsche's point when he writes: "Ah, reason, seriousness, mastery over the affects, the whole somber thing called reflection, all these prerogatives and showpieces of man: how dearly they have been bought! how much blood and cruelty is at the bottom of all 'good things'" (1969 #4 62) that go by the name of civilization!

Conclusion

Nietzsche reads *Don Quijote* as a text that reflects a moment of transition between the Middle Ages and modernity. And while I do not completely agree with Professor Picart that Nietzsche was a "masked Romantic," I do believe that not unlike Cervantes, Nietzsche was a thinker caught at the crossroads of modernity's (bourgeois) "Romanticism" and the Greek, Dionysian world of his Quixotean readings. That he viewed Don Quijote's individualist idealism as the opposite of "herd morality" (1966 #202: 115-116), with slightly more than a touch of Romantic admiration, should not surprise us, but neither should it surprise us that he found Don Quijote's madness laughable: because for Nietzsche the question was not one of a return to the past, but of a dangerous journey forward, tempered with an understanding of history.[8] Some day,

[7]This essay, published four years before Nietzsche's death already cites Nietzsche's anti-Christian psychology of pity (21)

[8]Aptly, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote: "In late ages that may be proud of their humanity, so much fear remains, so much *superstitious* fear of the 'savage cruel beast' whose conquest is the very pride of these more humane ages, that even palpable truths remain unspoken for centuries, as if by some agreement, because they look

he suggested we would have to write a history of the senses, a history of the body; and some day, he may equally have suggested, we will have to write a history of laughter, which clearly, will also be a history of our cruelty, of all our Abu Ghraibs.[9]

as if they might reanimate that savage beast one has finally 'mortified.' Perhaps I dare something when I let one of these truths slip out…We should reconsider cruelty and open our eyes….That 'savage animal' has really not been 'mortified, it lives and it flourishes…" (1966 #229: 158).

[9]In an attempt to make light of the torture and humiliations inflicted on Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib, conservative radio personality, Rush Limbaugh likened the tortures captured in the photographs to mere "pranks," and college "hazings." But what if we reverse his logic and liken the "light hearted," "festive" college "hazings" across America to the tortures of Abu Ghraib? After all, nothing prevents us from doing so; for if A = B, then B has to be equal to A.

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